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THE ROLE OF ISABELLA IN *THE CHANGELING*

The role of Isabella in *The Changeling* has received remarkably little attention. Even those very few critics who have been sympathetic to the sub plot of the play have in fact said very little about it, and therefore about Isabella. If my general contention is accepted that the play is primarily a presentation of madness and that that point cannot be grasped without examining the sub plot, Isabella must inevitably come to be seen as more important.[1]

In general, I believe that the nature of Isabella's sanity helps us to understand the nature of Beatrice's madness, and vice versa.[2] There is, of course, a connection between psychology and morality, in that insanity is associated with good and sanity with evil, but the emphasis of the play is not so much on morality as on psychology, and Isabella is by no means idealized but rather depicted as a fully credible human figure, who, although never ill-intentioned towards others, certainly knows how to look after herself, and whose sexuality, although psychologically very different from Beatrice's, is not exactly that of some boringly admirable prude. Rather, Middleton and Rowley show us, seemingly without disapproval, that she is inclined towards enjoying herself during her husband's absence, but that she is sensible, and moral, enough not to give in to her urges when the real test comes. She is not a frigid woman, but she is conscious of her sexual appetite (which Beatrice usually is not), and she does not allow her libido to run away with her (as does Diaphanta).

Isabella is first introduced to us in the course of the dialogue (I.ii) between her husband Alibius and his `man' Lollio. Alibius is the `psychiatrist' who is in charge of the lunatics in his asylum, but ironically shows himself unfit for the job in his attitude to his wife. He might be expected to be sane himself, but shows himself paranoid in suspecting that his young wife might be unfaithful to him during his absence while he produces absolutely no evidence to substantiate this view. His is the duty of care, but he decides, quite callously, that his wife should in effect be locked up while he is away, with Lollio in charge of her. Lollio is sane enough to see that his master has no reason for his jealousy, and that she is neither foolish nor mad, but he is a lecher, and thus himself also not the right person to look after her. It is not exaggerated to see Alibius as a man who is insanely and unfeelingly possessive in his attitude to his wife, while Lollio tends to think of her as a sexual object and discusses her as such. The1

[1] See my general discussion of the play, `Folly and Madness in *The Changeling'*, *Essays in Criticism* 38 (1988), pp. 1-21; also the Introduction to my edition (London, and New York, 1990), from which all quotations in the present paper are taken.

[2] My concern here is with Isabella rather than Beatrice, and only some brief explicit comparisons will be offered in the course of this essay. For a full analysis of Beatrice's madness I refer the reader to my more general critical discussions, mentioned in the previous footnote.

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lack of respect that these males show for Isabella as a fellow human being can only engender sympathy in us for her.

But, while that response is within limits appropriate enough, Isabella is quite a bit tougher than we might have expected from this scene. Although Alibius would seek to dominate her physically, her mind is very much her own, and this mental resilience is what she shows towards all the subsequent males with whom she comes into contact in the course of the action, although that is not to say her response does not include other feelings. Characteristically, when she appears on stage, in III.iii, she immediately and indignantly protests about the fact that she has been locked up — not in a rage, but by questioning Lollio about the authority for his action, and by complaining about boredom. When Lollio explains that her imprisonment is due to Alibius' jealousy, she responds calmly and sarcastically: "'Tis very well, and he'll prove very wise' (11). She is not meek, but tackles her situation with firm realism and understanding of her husband's psyche rather than any lack of control or insight. Her cool intelligence is very much to the fore too when Lollio makes his first sexual advance to her, suggesting that as she is `half mad already' (i.e. Alibius' other half), she might as well `be half foolish too' (i.e. his, as he is in charge of fools and Isabella calls him a fool). Isabella replies: 'Y'are a brave, saucy rascal' (19-20).

She then seizes the initiative, and does this in a way which we shall come to see as characteristic. She realizes that one of her best defenses is play-acting. She acts as though her mentality is much the same as Lollio's:

> Come on, sir,
> Afford me then the pleasure of your bedlam;
> You were commending once today to me
> Your last-come lunatic: what a proper
> Body there was without brains to guide it,
> And what a pitiful delight appeared
> In that defect, as if your wisdom had found
> A mirth in madness. Pray sir, let me partake,
> If there be such a pleasure. (20-8)

Her pretense here is for one thing that she shares Lollio's sexual values. She claims to seek the `pleasure' (here and generally in *The Changeling* `sexual pleasure') which one can uniquely find in a madhouse: as Lollio views sex as purely a matter of the body, it follows that a lunatic without brains must be a particularly attractive sexual object, provided, of course, that he is `proper' (handsome). The sarcastic irony in such words as `sir' and `your wisdom' — carefully tuned so that Lollio won't take undue offense, but making their quiet point — is humanly and intellectually appealing in a way which belies the ostensible meaning of her proposition. Similarly, the adjective `pitiful' quite undercuts the `delight' which Isabella professes emotionally to share with Lollio: she acts as though she agrees with Lollio in finding a brainless madman simply contemptible but the audience can readily appreciate that such a person should rather arouse compassion. Thus she makes a wider point about human conduct than her supposed interest in `pleasure' — to which she tellingly re-

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turns at the end of her speech — would seem to indicate, while yet she leads Lollio to believe that she, too, is callous towards lunatics.

In what follows her wider point becomes quite obvious, and her pretense of contempt for madmen is abandoned. When Franciscus successfully acts the part of madman she exclaims:

> Alack, alack, it is too full of pity
> To be laughed at. (44-5)

and thus rebukes Lollio's sense of fun concerning madness.

But, interestingly, her attitude towards sex appears more ambiguous, and we begin to wonder whether her play-acting about it does not, after all, also express something which she really feels. She shows a caring interest in Franciscus' supposed madness when she says:

> His conscience is unquiet; sure that was
> The cause of this. (60-1)

Here `conscience' means `internal recognition of external facts', and Isabella can diagnose the essential condition of madness as the dramatists see it with just such insight as Alibius lacks. But this statement is immediately followed by the significant addition:

> A proper gentleman.

From the viewpoint of medical diagnosis and care, the fact that Franciscus is handsome is irrelevant. The dramatists may mean that Isabella shows a touching concern for someone who is handsome yet mad, but they keep open the possibility that her interest is that of a flesh-and-blood woman.

This ambiguity in Isabella's attitude is something we remember when later in III.iii Lollio introduces her to the counterfeit fool, Antonio. Isabella genuinely appears to believe that Franciscus is mad, and thus firmly dismisses him when she feels he needs to be removed:

> I prithee, hence with him, now he grows dangerous. (89)

But when Lollio introduces her to Antonio, Isabella is clearly more interested, and even after she has seen quite a bit of him she is less keen to part with him than with Franciscus. Antonio's first speech is a hundred lines after his entry, but when Lollio asks Isabella a good deal later `Will you be rid of the fool now' (163-4) she replies:

> By no means; let him stay a little.

It seems as though the dramatists are implying some very interesting parallels. When Isabella meets Franciscus he appears to arouse and interest her, but this is a prelude to what follows: the pattern is similar to what we see in Beatrice's

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case, where an initial interest in Alonzo is followed by a stronger interest in Alsemero and a far more intense one in De Flores, or in Diaphanta's, where the initial interest in Jasperino is followed by a stronger appetite for Alsemero. The meeting with the first man in each instance merely provides a spark.

It is very likely that Isabella's interest in Antonio is generated not only by the earlier appearance of Franciscus (and his and Lollio's talk about sex), but in particular by the fact that, in contrast with that of Franciscus, Antonio's role-playing is quite transparent. That she is not taken in by it is quite obvious from her first address to him:

> How long hast thou been a fool? (105)

One would not ask such a question unless one felt sure that the person in question is *not* a fool. Likewise, she recognizes the sexual advance in his response:

> Ever since I came hither, cousin.

And replies, seemingly so as to correct him: `Cousin? I'm none of thy cousins, fool' (107), i.e. `I am not only not your biological cousin, but not your strumpet/cousin [a common sense of "cousin"] either'. Yet she is clearly intrigued by him. When one of the madmen is heard to call, she says to Lollio `Hark you, your scholars in the upper room/Are out of order', and when he has disappeared she turns to Antonio so as to ask him what he is up to: `Well, sir' (116). Antonio wastes no time in explaining what he is after, and Isabella does not reject him. When he kisses her after some flirtatious talk her only comment is: `A forward fool too!' (134).

Nevertheless, she is controlled enough to be able to say to him a little later:

> As you are a gentleman, I'll not discover you;
> That's all the favour that you must expect.
> When you are weary, you may leave the school,
> For all this while you have but played the fool. (144-7)

Antonio has been a pupil in Lollio's `school' for fools, supposedly, but not just as a counterfeit: while playing the role of a fool he has come to be like one and thus cannot be taken seriously. So Isabella is not merely witty, but puts him in his place. Soon after she again brilliantly exploits the situation in which he finds himself. When Lollio asks `Is he not witty, pretty well, for a fool?' (152), Isabella replies:

> If he hold on as he begins, he is like
> To come to something.

Here she says (1) if he persists he may achieve some level of learning; (2) he may have an orgasm (with play on *come* and *something);* and (3) he is likely to come to nothing worthwhile. Again she partly acknowledges an `official', innocuous

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sense, partly plays along with Antonio, and partly — in the end perhaps most significantly — criticizes him.

Nevertheless, she does appear to be attracted to him, however moderately. When Lollio again briefly disappears to look after his patients, Antonio again immediately becomes amorous, and although Isabella rebukes him, she allows him to kiss her, not uttering an objection, but the caveat that Lollio is watching from the upper stage (178). So successful does Antonio potentially appear to be that Lollio calls out in an aside `Cuckoo' (191), thus indicating that Alibius is likely to be cuckolded, and at this moment the dramatists make the madmen appear, visibly to Antonio as well as Isabella, in the shape of birds and beasts. As Antonio is carried away by his animalistic appetite, he wonders `What are these?' and, crucially, Isabella explains that lunatics act on the basis of their fantasy, not their reason. Her grasp of the contrast between insane and sane behaviour is clearly used by the authors to reveal to us that she will be able to exercise self-control, and this she does. She has meanwhile stood in an embrace with Antonio for some considerable time, but acknowledges that the appearance of the madmen is `Of fear enough to part us' (192). Her behaviour shows that the dramatists see a connection between what happens in our fantasy and the bestial side of our nature — as Isabella can articulate that connection, and is guided by her reason, she can be saved. Beatrice, by contrast, subordinates (unknowingly) her reason to her fantasy and her bestial side, and Diaphanta is totally controlled by the latter.

After her penetrating analysis of human madness, Isabella is in no further danger of yielding to her sensual appetite, but her sense of shock emerges when she is left alone on stage:

> Here the restrained current might make breach,
> Spite of the watchful bankers. Would a woman stray,
> She need not gad abroad to seek her sin,
> It would be brought home one ways of other:
> The needle's point will to the fixed north,
> Such drawing arctics women's beauties are. (213-18)

She had been in danger of underestimating the impact of her beauty on male sensuality, but the `current' is also that of her own sexual feeling, and her reflection about the possibility that a woman might stray, while now detached enough, cannot disguise the fact that she was in some danger of doing so herself. Inasmuch as she provides a norm for sexual conduct she does not do so through lack of sensuality, or even through complete chastity, but by exercising self-control at a highly critical moment.

Having passed her test, Isabella subsequently finds it very easy to hold Lollio at bay, who, himself quite unabashed about his sexual drive (and perhaps obsessed by it), cannot understand that Isabella's momentary appetite for Antonio is transitory and not evidence of lust for all men. So persistent is Lollio in his expectation that Isabella will yield that she has to threaten him with the prospect that she will ask Antonio to cut his throat in exchange for enjoying her. Drastic though her approach here is (240-6), it is what the occasion de-

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mands, and her tough realism is of course to be seen, by us, as forming an ironic contrast with Beatrice's behaviour, who is confused, weak and vicious enough to ask De Flores to kill Alonzo so that she may enjoy Alsemero and who against her conscious intention comes to enjoy De Flores himself instead.

Although her experiences are such as to justify negative feelings towards men, Isabella is too controlled and too human to let those sway her. She becomes a teacher of men, but does not decide to avoid their company or to hate them. Rather, in IV.iii, we see her evince a tremendous sense of fun while she mixes with them on her terms.

As for Lollio, she has taught him already in III.iii to keep a proper distance from her, and the result is that at the beginning of IV.iii the two of them are congenial partners who can discuss the way Isabella is wooed by Franciscus and Antonio, and what remedy might be applied. Isabella learns from a letter in which he reveals the fact that Franciscus is a counterfeit too, and Lollio suggests that it will be effective for Isabella to disguise herself and to pretend that she is in love with her suitors, so that she will `mad the fool and make a fool of the madman' and thus treat them according to their natures (45-6). Of course the play distinguishes sharply between folly and madness, and therefore Lollio's statement is not strictly correct: if Antonio, as a fool, is to be cured of his condition, he should be confronted by folly rather than madness. The dramatists are probably indulging in a little joke at the expense of Lollio and the suitors, but in the event Isabella's pretended madness — although in fact it drives Antonio `mad' initially — does cure him of his folly, and Lollio helps to cure Franciscus similarly. The chief function of Isabella's teaching of the counterfeits thus becomes curing, a process in which she is aided by Lollio, but in which Alibius significantly plays no part. In the main plot, by contrast, Beatrice is consumed by insanity and actually harms others. However, we must also see the very real limits of Isabella's efficacy: her impact is confined to the counterfeits, and there is no indication that she could cure those who are genuinely and seriously mad or foolish.

But she certainly shows that she can play a role with verve and imagination, and thus provide an antidote to the not-so-successful counterfeits. It is probably no accident that she chooses the role of a madwoman, for Franciscus has shown that the part of a lunatic is comparatively easy to act, although it has not helped him to achieve his end, while Antonio in his role of fool appealed more to Isabella, but in part exactly because he did not succeed as an actor. Isabella wants to mislead Antonio and not to appeal to him, and thus her decision to present herself as a lunatic rather than a fool is appropriate to her purpose.

In her role as madwoman, Isabella demonstrates that she understands one of the chief points of the play, viz. that a lunatic lives in a fantasy world and is not necessarily stupid, while a fool is simply lacking in intelligence. Thus she presents herself as someone distinctly different from what any normal observer would take her to be: she makes out that Antonio is Icarus (as he jumps and falls while learning how to dance), that she is in love with him (as Ariadne who loves Theseus and the moon goddess who loves Endymion), and so forth. Her posing also enables her to approach Antonio sexually, and indeed to do so

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more vigorously and obscenely than he had done in any of his advances to her (especially when she offers to `suck out those billows in [his] belly', 116). As he judges her mad, and perhaps because she is so startingly lewd, he rejects her without hesitation. This enables Isabella to drive her point home with brilliant force: she reveals herself, and thus makes Antonio aware of what he has missed out on. Mockingly, she rebukes him for not seeing through her disguise, and she pretends that she had put that on `to beguile/The nimble eye of watchful jealousy' (129-30). She even goes so far as to claim that she is genuinely `mad' now and no longer a `feigner' (136) because Antonio has not proved a `quick-sighted lover' (134). This powerful, teasing confrontation of Antonio has the healthy effect of making him temporarily `mad' (143) with frustration and disappointment, with the result that he comes to see what a fool he has been, as he admits both here (`I have fooled too much', 141) and in the final scene of the play (V.iii.204-7).

As I see it, the chief serious purpose of Isabella's role as madwoman, the comic presentation notwithstanding, is to show us how firmly in command she is, and how she teaches Antonio to control his sensuality by mocking it, first by a mad caricature of it, and then by pretending to be annoyed (i.e. `mad' with anger) when he does not see through her disguise. But there is another possibility. Let us consider the intriguing lines:

> Have I put on this habit of a frantic,
> With love as full of fury, to beguile
> The nimble eye of watchful jealousy,
> And am I thus rewarded? (128-31)

In one of the rare discussions that demonstrate an awareness of Isabella's sensuality, Barbara John Baines comments: `The emotional tone, the sense of sudden awareness, in Isabella's parting words to Antonio indicate that she has learned much more from her disguise than he. She has seen the madness of her own conscious, or perhaps subconscious, willingness to "deal with" Antonio'.[3] I do not think that this is likely to be correct, as I think Isabella learned all she needed to know about her sensuality, and the need to restrain that `current', in III.iii. The person who needs to be taught at this stage is Antonio, not Isabella. But it does appear possible that, for all her control, Isabella is genuinely disappointed with Antonio's failure to reward her for her effort. As Rowley, the author of IV.iii, has a habit of being ambiguous (even more so than Middleton), I think that we may have to see Isabella as both in command of her sensuality and a little frustrated with Antonio's failure to respond as a `quick-sighted lover'. There appears to be no good reason for believing that the dramatists cannot allow both Isabella and us a dual response to her situation.

She stays loyal to her husband, and so she should, particularly as he too has learned from events:

> I see all apparent, wife, and will change now
> Into a better husband, and never keep
> Scholars that shall be wiser than myself. (V.iii.213-5)

[3] *The Lust Motif in the Plays of Thomas Middleton* (Salzburg, 1973), pp. 122-3.

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But, although Isabella is never in intellectual doubt about her moral position, she is human enough almost to forget about it in III.iii, when Antonio actively tempts her, and almost to want to forget about it in IV.iii when supposedly she tempts him only in order to teach him her own self-control. Diaphanta is sane but lacks sexual restraint, and Beatrice is insane because she does not understand the force of her unconscious sexuality. Isabella is sane because she does recognize her sexuality, but also because she can keep it within proper bounds although it is tested both by others and by herself. If there was no sexuality for her to be conscious of, and no test of it, she would not be a complete person, and therefore could not be a norm for conduct, psychologically and morally. If her stature strikes us as more modest than that of, say, the Duchess of Malfi, we must conclude that that is because Middleton and Rowley offer us a very unidealized, unromantic view of humanity.

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